



ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE BY BUILDING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

REMARKS AS PREPARED

Vatican City
July 21, 2015

Good morning and thank you for having me.

I want to thank His Holiness Pope Francis and Bishop Marcelo Sanchez Sorondo.

When it comes to climate change, New Orleans and Louisiana have a special responsibility to the world to say what we have seen and what we have learned.

We rely on nature for so much. One quarter of the seafood produced in America comes from our waters and because of the mighty Mississippi River we are also home to 5 of America's top 15 busiest ports.

But perhaps most notably, every year the Gulf Coast via Louisiana provides America with more oil and gas than we import from Saudi Arabia.

And like many other parts of the world, the blessing of abundant natural resources can also be a curse if not used properly. It is complicated.

Thousands of Louisiana families rely on jobs in the oil and gas industry to put food on the table. One of my first jobs was in a chemical company. But that economic benefit comes at a cost.

Just 5 years ago we suffered the worst environmental disaster in American history when BP oil rig blew up in the Gulf of Mexico.

11 workers dead and 760 liters of oil spilled directly off the Louisiana coastline causing tremendous damage.

It was devastating, but really for 100 years our coast has been slashed and burned for the benefit of American oil consumers. 16,000 kilometers of canals and pipelines cut through our marsh. Pair that with the damming and mismanagement of the Mississippi River, along with sea level rise and subsidence.

The consequences are clear for anyone willing to look.

Louisiana's wetlands are the fastest disappearing delta on the planet. Since 1930, over 4,921 square kilometers of wetlands have been lost. Every year, 6,191 hectares of coast evaporate into the Gulf of Mexico. That is like losing nearly half of Roma Aeterna every ten years. By the time I finish this speech, another half a hectare will have vanished and the cost goes beyond lost beauty, culture and ecology.

Wetlands serve a very important purpose; it is the first line of defense against the effects of hurricanes.

The miles of marsh and barrier islands are supposed to weaken storms before they hit populated areas.

So ten years ago, as Hurricane Katrina made landfall, we were vulnerable - our levees were weak and our natural protections were degraded.

We became a warning to all others – neglect and environmental degradation has consequences. The poor are hit the hardest and suffer the most.

The levees broke, the water flooded in, and in a blink of an eye the Gulf of Mexico surged over the rooftops of a great American city.

Thousands of us, many the most vulnerable who couldn't find a way to evacuate the city got left behind; as if our lives did not have value.

So it was for many a life and death struggle to stay above the toxic mix of chemicals and salt water - in total, 1800 dead because of Katrina. 500,000 homes hurt, 250,000 destroyed, families torn apart and strewn to the winds.

The images are seared into the souls of all those who bore witness. A man up to his waist in water with a limp little baby in his arms, a screaming woman on her knees, eyes closed, hands pressed together in prayer.

Long lines in the blazing Louisiana sun - thousands waiting for a sip of water or a bite of food, begging for someone to take them away from what had become hell on earth. It took days to get them out.

In that moment it all converged. On the streets of America, a veil had been lifted to reveal an ugly, scary reality. It revealed that we are in fact vulnerable. It revealed that our problems from poverty to environmental degradation could destroy us all if we did not change.

But in the midst of all the death and destruction, something else miraculous happened, something incredible.

While our city was shrouded in darkness like never before, we found salvation, light and hope from the angels among us.

There were so many.

These angels were young African American boys pushing an older white man in a rusted wheelchair looking for water. There was the crying young girl who had lost her mother holding hands with another woman she did not know.

There was the clergyman from Dallas who navigated around the police barricades to get back into the city and help feed people. There was a navy of small boats buzzing around flooded streets pulling survivors from the water.

The admonition Lord who is my neighbor came to mind at that moment and today the answer is, it is all of us.

Strangers pressed together by circumstance, leaning on each other for comfort and support, citizens of the world guided by their faith and their mercy came to our aide. We are forever grateful.

With the rising water, differences and divisions were washed away and together we learned a lesson and a hard truth that so many of us had long forgotten. The value of our lives is not measured by the things we own - not by a house, not by a car, not by the clothes we wear. As long as we have each other and God's grace, we will always have a home. That is what we in New Orleans have learned.

But to survive and thrive in this new age, we must do more. After Katrina the people of New Orleans said we are not just rebuilding the city that we once were, but are creating the city that we always should have been.

We are coming back smarter as one of the largest residential solar cities in the US with high sustainability standards for public buildings like schools and libraries.

Plus, we've spent \$14.5 billion investing in 560 kilometers of reinforced flood protections including the world's largest storm-surge barrier. We are also restoring our coast, spending millions to build back the marsh we have lost. And we're taking a lesson from the Dutch, learning to live with water using things like permeable pavement and water plazas.

But more needs to be done. So in August, as a part of our Katrina 10 years later commemoration called "Resilient New Orleans" we will showcase our growth, recovery, and the long-term resilience plan we have developed over the last ten years.

This is what the future looks like, but being resilient means more than having lots of solar or green building practices. It means more than having levees and wetlands to hold back the wind and the water.

To be truly resilient as a society means combating other more chronic stresses like poverty, inequality, violence, and racism.

It means replacing hatred and disassociation in our world with love and harmony, striking the right balance between human needs and the environment that surrounds us.

That can be the foundation for a new world, a world worthy of our children's' great promise.

But it all starts with one single step, a single step reaching out a single hand reaching out; one single conversation with someone who you would normally not talk with, someone of a different class, race, group or religion.

Then, once we start to bring down the walls that divide us we will find that really, we are all the same. We all want the same thing – peace, prosperity, economic opportunity, and for our kids to have a better life than us.

This moment will define the 21st century and we cannot afford to fail. The challenge has been laid before us. It will test our resolve and our love for one another, but we have been here before, faced challenges as large and as difficult, and we have overcome.

Again and again, our will has been tested, and together, again, with the ever guiding hand of God, we will find a way or we will make one.

Our Holy Father reminds us that the Lord has invited us to be attentive to the beauty that there is in this world. I would suggest we take Him up on that invitation.